



THE STORY OF RECYCLING – PART 4: PLASTICS **RECYCLING IN WASHINGTON STATE**

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Plastic Recycling is Alive and Well in Our State. Of the 39 counties in Washington, all collect plastic to some degree. At least 32 collect PET, 37 collect HDPE, and 32 collect LDPE. In most cases, the LDPE is collected via grocery bag collections in stores and/or through commercial recycling for plastic film. PET and HDPE are collected in many curbside programs, but more commonly, through drop boxes, as many eastside counties have limited or no curbside recycling collection. Even those with an active curbside program, such as Spokane, are limited in what plastics they collect. Spokane only takes PET and HDPE “natural” bottles and jars at the curb, but will take colored HDPE (bottles and jars) at its transfer stations.

This contrasts to the Westside, which has many “All Plastic Bottles” programs, such as in Thurston County, which accepts all bottles #1-#7 (though markets are only strong for #1 and #2). However, there are still many Westside counties that only take #1 and #2 bottles.

There is great potential to increase the overall recovery of plastic by increasing film recovery since film makes up nearly half of all the plastic produced. Of the film produced about 60% is readily recyclable.

There is a lengthy list of collectors/processors of plastic across the state, from Spokane Recycling Products in Spokane, to Clayton-Ward in the Tri-Cities, to the numerous companies like Fibres International and Full Container Recovery on the Westside. A (not so) quick check revealed at least 30 companies, and no doubt there are more.

For most of these companies, plastics are a minor part of their operation – for some even as small as one percent. For others, like Dolco in Wenatchee, its business is in just one material – in this case polystyrene (Dolco accepts it from the public for recycling back into new polystyrene products). Some of the plastic recyclers take material from both residential and commercial sources, while many others accept just from commercial sources. This material tends to be much cleaner than the residential stream and therefore more valuable.

To Market, To Market

Some of the recyclers send bales of plastic to markets. Others will do some grinding before marketing it, thus adding value to the material. Now called ‘regrind,’ –as the plastic has completed one more step in the recycling process. Some companies will also send plastics loose in Gaylord boxes. And where are the recyclers sending this loose, baled or regrind plastic? This does not vary whether east or west of the mountains.

As far as domestic markets go, Merlin Plastics in British Columbia is an important destination for many of Washington’s plastics. Merlin *pelletizes* (makes into pellets) the plastics and then sells to end users around the continent, and perhaps beyond. Merlin is versatile and will take mixed loads of materials (a truck load with bales of both PET and HDPE, for example). This means companies do not have to stockpile materials waiting for a full load, which is particularly helpful to smaller collectors. Other important domestic markets are for film and include Boise here in Washington, and Trex in Reno, NV.

Export markets appear to be of high significance -- on both sides of the mountains. Export prices are very competitive, and tend to drive the market, easily offsetting any additional transport costs. Furthermore, as one eastside recycler pointed out, export markets can tolerate more contamination, which saves on sorting

costs. Even processors that have been sending film to domestic markets are now 'experimenting' with export markets for film.

There are other active plastic recycling efforts of note in Washington State. Rainier Plastics in Yakima gets industrial scrap from a wide area, pelletizes it and then sells to domestic markets for manufacturing into new plastic bags. Rainier Plastics currently processes up to 20 million pounds of polyethylene scrap a year. According to their website, Northwest Ag Plastics, Inc., of Moxee, WA, collects, granulates and recycles plastic pesticide containers for the agricultural industry in Washington, Idaho, and Oregon. Northwest Polymers in Molalla separate and grind PVC. Some plastic recyclers in Oregon include: Denton Plastics, Resco Plastics and Quantum Resources.

The <http://www.NWPlasticsMarkets.com> is under construction. The search engine is being redesigned so that users can search for specific types of buyers and suppliers (e.g., handlers, reclaimers, manufacturers, brokers,) of both unprocessed and processed recovered plastics. The new site will be launched in March 2005.

The End of the Story.

There appear to be very few actual end users here in Washington State. Boise has a plant in Satsop where the plan is to make a new plastic/wood siding product, but production has not started as yet. RPM or Recycled Product Manufacturing, a Tacoma company that previously manufactured plastic lumber products, is no longer in business. However, our state is active in collecting plastic and sending it out into the world for remanufacture elsewhere.

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That does it for The Story of Plastics Recycling. Stayed tuned next month -- the focus will be on Glass!
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